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Part 1

"You should rest, Leopardstar," the mottled brown medicine cat said to her as she paced around in his den, her dappled tail twitching anxiously.

"I don't have time to rest, Mudfur," Leopardstar sighed in exasperation. "I have so much to do."

"Well, what use will you be to RiverClan if you are dead on your paws?" Mudfur said, an edge of sharpness to his tone.

Leopardstar's ear twitched. She recognized that voice as the same one he would use to scold her when she was only a kit. Leopardstar set her jaw.

But, she wasn't his helpless little kit anymore. She was RiverClan's leader. *His* leader.

"I'll be even more useless resting," Leopardstar snapped back, the fur down her back bristling. "ThunderClan and WindClan won't stop casting us hostile glances from across the river. We may have fought against BloodClan together, but they clearly have not forgotten that I joined RiverClan with Tigerstar, who was the very cat that brought BloodClan here in the first place. And, my only 'allies,' if you can even call them that, are on the other side of the forest. But, Blackstar doesn't even talk to me at the Gathering anymore. Not that I ever really cared for him, but he is so eager to cut himself off from anything that reminds him of Tigerstar, RiverClan is left to stand alone."

Mudfur opened his jaws to interrupt, but Leopardstar barreled on, her tail lashing.

"And, as if these outside threats are not enough, the inside of our Clan is riddled with strife as well. I've got disobedient warriors who think that I'm weak and that I shamed myself and our Clan for submitting to Tigerstar. And, to top it all off, I've got a deputy that

won't even meet my gaze... I was foolish to appoint Mistyfoot to that position. She is a fine warrior sure, but she hates me, Mudfur. I thought with her leading beside me, we could bind RiverClan together after all the bloodshed TigerClan caused, but she won't forgive me for Stonefur's death..."

"Leopardstar, take a deep breath," Mudfur murmured, interrupting her rant.

Leopardstar realized all of her fur was standing on end, and she was digging her claws deeply into the sandy ground of the den. Leopardstar sighed, sheathing her claws and flattening her bristling fur with some difficulty.

"I know RiverClan faces many threats, but you need your strength to deal with these things now more than ever," Mudfur continued in a low voice. "Remember, you are sleeping and eating for more than just yourself now."

"Don't remind me." Leopardstar's voice dripped with dread as she closed her eyes against the thought. "Just another disaster to add to my growing list of problems."

"Well what's done can't be undone," Mudfur mumbled, his tail twitching faintly. "When are you planning on telling the Clan?"

Leopardstar gave her whiskers a wry, bitter twitch.

"Is 'never' an option?" Leopardstar asked, opening her eyes and shooting her father a look.

Mudfur tilted his dappled brown head at Leopardstar, flattening one ear.

"I think the Clan will probably notice when kits suddenly appear in your den one sunrise," he responded just as drily.

Leopardstar sighed. It was a heavy, weary sigh that shook her down to her bones. She turned away from her father, unable to keep looking at him.

"Seriously, Mudfur, what am I going to do? Nothing will rip our

Clan apart more than finding out that their leader is expecting the kits of the cat that caused the deaths of their friends and family," Leopardstar said, her chin bobbing to her chest as her head drooped. "I've ruined RiverClan."

Leopardstar waited for his response, but Mudfur was quiet for a long while.

She stirred in surprise when he suddenly appeared at her side, draping his thick-furred tail over her back.

"...Lie." Mudfur's voice was barely above a whisper.

Leopardstar's heart clenched to hear the suggestion coming out of her noble, honest, *honorable* father's mouth. She knew she had done this to him. She had contaminated him, dragged him down to her dirty level.

His eyes searched his daughter's, their dark amber colors identical.

She saw the desperation in his gaze. He would truly do anything for her. Was that the reason why he stood aside when she brought Tigerstar into her Clan? Is that why he so easily forgave her after all the bloodshed? Why he hardly blinked when she told him about the kits? How much more could she push; how many more disasters would it take for Leopardstar to finally drive him away too? And, what would she do then, when she was finally, truly, utterly alone?

"They don't have to know that it was Tigerstar," Mudfur murmured. "Tell them that was someone who died in the battle with BloodClan. Say it was Reedtail. You two were always good friends; it's believable."

Leopardstar's tail twitched, and she sighed again. Lying still wouldn't solve her problems. She cast her gaze down to the ground, but she didn't move away from Mudfur, allowing the gentle, familiar pressure of his tail to remain draped across her back.

"So, then I have the kits and then what? What sort of leader wastes moons in the nursery when their Clan is in a state like ours? The weather is already turning colder, soon leaf-bare will be here in full

force. They already call me weak now, just imagine what they will say then," Leopardstar said, a slight growl entering her voice. "I will lose all authority."

"Well, either way, the kits aren't just going to disappear just because you really wish it," Mudfur responded, his voice stern for a moment before turning more gentle. "Besides, look on the bright side, maybe new kits are just what the Clan needs to bring it together. Inspire hope for the future."

Leopardstar's ears twitched backwards doubtfully.

"You still have time to think things over and come up with a plan. And, who knows, maybe RiverClan will be in a better place by then. The kits won't be here for another moon at least," Mudfur said.

Mudfur brushed his muzzle against her cheek. Leopardstar sighed softly, an overwhelming desire to lean against Mudfur's side and bury her face in his fur flooding through her. For that instant, she wanted nothing more in the world than to shield herself from her problems with the comforting touch of her father's pelt... But, she resisted.

She was RiverClan's leader, she reminded herself, and Mudfur was RiverClan's medicine cat. She wasn't a kit in need of comfort from her father. Leopardstar drew away from him, his familiar scent fading in her nose.

"Thank you for your council," Leopardstar said, raising her chin in what she hoped was a commanding expression. "I will let you know what my decision is... at some point. In the meanwhile, I would appreciate your continued discretion."

Mudfur bowed his head to Leopardstar.

"Of course," he murmured.

Leopardstar turned, brushing through the reeds that sheltered the entrance of the medicine cat's den and striding out into the camp.

- -

"Mistyfoot," Leopardstar called as she spotted the sleek blue-grey she-cat heading towards the fresh-kill pile to deposit a couple of newly caught fish.

A good haul for such cold weather, Leopardstar noted.

"Can I see you in my den for a moment?"

Mistyfoot blinked her blue eyes at Leopardstar, giving a nod.

Leopardstar waited for Mistyfoot in her nest in the reed-woven den, her tail-tip twitching with impatience and anxiety. Leopardstar knew regardless of what she decided to do with the kits, her Clan would need strong, united leadership to get through it. Which meant mending the chasm between her and her deputy.

Leopardstar closed her eyes, sighing heavily to herself.

It might be an easier task to move the sky.

Mistyfoot strode into the den, blinking her eyes questioningly at Leopardstar as she read the tension in her leader's shoulders.

"Is something wrong, Leopardstar?" Mistyfoot asked, taking a seat in front of her.

Leopardstar sighed again, her tail-tip twitching.

"I'm going to be blunt with you, Mistyfoot," Leopardstar said.

"I never expect anything less from you, Leopardstar," Mistyfoot replied.

Leopardstar shot her a sharp look, searching for mockery in her expression, but the blue-grey she-cat's face was smooth and expressionless, her words calm.

"...What can I do to regain your trust?" Leopardstar asked.

Mistyfoot blinked her eyes rapidly at Leopardstar like she didn't quite understand the question.

"Since Stonefur's death, you have been so distant," Leopardstar went on, looking away from her and down at her paws. "We used to be good friends before. I would like to be that way again."

"Well, our friendship didn't stop you from imprisoning me!" Mistyfoot snapped, sending Leopardstar's eyes flashing back over towards her. "And, you were also good friends with Stonefur, but that didn't stop you from killing him."

Leopardstar saw Mistyfoot's calm demeanor had been rapidly washed away, and now a storm raged across her face. Her blue-grey fur bristled slightly, but Leopardstar noticed she had set her jaw like she was trying desperately to keep her emotions under control.

Leopardstar's ears flattened, her lip curling up slightly. A part of her wanted to argue with Mistyfoot. Ask her how she expected her to stand up to Tigerstar and the might of ShadowClan. Or, explain how Tigerstar had told her it was a necessary evil, done to strengthen the cats that remained. That she would be doing it so that the rest of RiverClan would be stronger.

But, they had been through that argument before, and Leopardstar knew that any point she tried to make would fall on deaf ears, only working to push Mistyfoot further away.

And, besides... Leopardstar felt the truth circling in her mind like a dark vulture. Deep down, she knew that those arguments were only justifications that she tried to tell herself. To convince herself that she had tried to do the right thing... So that she could live another day with the horrors of her actions.

Leopardstar clenched her jaw.

So, she didn't have to face the facts that she was blind. And, a *coward.*

Leopardstar dug her claws into the mossy nest beneath her. The only thing that stood a chance of healing the wound between her and her deputy was true, honest vulnerability. She couldn't pretend to be the fierce leader she wished she was. Mistyfoot was smart and clear-eyed. She would see through that facade.

Leopardstar bowed her head, accepting the full force of her deputy's anger.

"I know," Leopardstar admitted, her voice hoarse. "And, I am truly so sorry. I betrayed Stonefur. And, you."

Leopardstar looked away from Mistyfoot's gaze, unable to meet her eyes. She stared down at her golden paws instead.

"I know that I can't change what happened," Leopardstar said, her voice rasping quietly. "But, please, Mistyfoot, if not for me, for the good of RiverClan, we need to be able to trust each other."

Mistyfoot was silent for a long few heartbeats. Leopardstar's gaze flickered back up to her as the silence stretched on, and when their gazes met, Leopardstar saw Mistyfoot's blue eyes were two chips of frozen ice.

"My loyalty has always been with RiverClan. It was for the good of RiverClan that I accepted this position as deputy," Mistyfoot began, her voice flat. "It is for the good of RiverClan that I continue to work with you. Calm and agreeable, despite what you've done. This is because RiverClan is and always has been my home. My family. As it was Stonefur's... But, do not ask me to trust you, Leopardstar. Stonefur did, and look where that got him. I will work each day to make sure RiverClan is safe and strong, but each day I will also watch *you*. To make sure what happened in TigerClan *never* happens again. To make sure you never betray any one of my clan-mates *again*."

Mistyfoot rose to her feet, her chin held high as she shot Leopardstar one final icy look.

"You want to know what you can do to regain my trust?" Mistyfoot's fangs flashed as she curled her lip up in a derisive snarl. "Bring my brother back."

- -

Everyday that passed, the mounting pressure only grew in Leopardstar's mind. Every sunrise was a day closer to the kits being

born; a day closer to when she had to make a decision.

Leopardstar was sprawled out across one of the sunning-stones at the edge of camp in the weak leaf-bare sun, her eyes half-shut, trying to quiet the anxious buzzing in her mind when some commotion across the camp pricked her attention. She saw Heavystep and Blackclaw facing off in front of the dwindling fresh-kill pile. The two tom's fur was bristling, and they looked only heartbeats away from the quarrel turning to physical blows. The river had been frozen over for a few days now, and without fish, tensions were running high as bellies stayed empty.

"I'm not going to let your fat tail take another piece of prey!" Blackclaw spat to Heavystep. "I saw you already took something to eat at dawn!"

"It was a scrawny mouse that I split with Dawnpaw." Heavystep's voice was a furious rumble. "And, I've been on a patrol and a hunt since then! The elders and queen are fed, there is no reason why I can't eat!"

"You can't eat, you fat fish-face because I say so!" Blackclaw snarled. "Save some for the rest of us!"

Heavystep snarled back, and the big tom crouched down like he was preparing to leap at Blackclaw.

"That's enough!" Leopardstar snapped, clambering to her paws and stalking over to the bickering toms, her tail twitching. "I will not have my warriors at each other's throats like this!"

Heavystep reluctantly straightened, but Blackclaw turned towards Leopardstar with a sneer plastered on his muzzle.

"Since when do you care about your warriors fighting?" he taunted. "I thought you enjoyed having us 'at each other's throats.' The strongest will survive and TigerClan will be better for it, right?"

Leopardstar's jaw fell open in shock. She struggled to find the words to respond, but her mind was filled with only blank, stunned silence.

"Blackclaw!" Mistyfoot's voice snapped across camp like shattering ice. "How dare you speak to your leader that way."

The bristling blue-grey she-cat stalked right up to Blackclaw, shoving her muzzle into his face.

"You are not in charge here. In case you have forgotten, the warrior code demands loyalty to your leader. Unless you somehow gained nine lives overnight, I expect you to listen to Leopardstar," Mistyfoot growled.

Blackclaw flattened his ears and bent his head, his mocking expression turning contrite.

"Sorry, Mistyfoot," he murmured. "It won't happen again."

"Good," Mistyfoot said, raising her chin.

"I know we are all tired and hungry, but the river won't stay frozen forever," Mistyfoot said, projecting her voice to address all of the cats in camp. "In the meanwhile, let's try to keep our spirits up and look for land-prey."

Mistyfoot turned back towards Blackclaw.

"Blackclaw, why don't you lead a patrol to the rock pile by the edge of the river near the two-leg bridge?" she asked. "No one has hunted there in a while, and the rocks will be warm from the sun. If we're lucky, you might be able to find some voles sunning themselves."

Blackclaw nodded in agreement.

Leopardstar watched him and Heavystep pad off, their argument adverted, but Leopardstar's whole body was still tense, her jaw clenched in anger.

"Mistyfoot, a word," Leopardstar growled, before turning and padding off to her den, leaving her deputy to follow.

The two cats entered the reed-woven den, where Leopardstar turned to glare at Mistyfoot.

"Thank you for your defense out there, but I can fight my own battles," Leopardstar hissed through clenched fangs, narrowing her eyes.

Mistyfoot scoffed, taking a seat inside the den.

"With all due respect Leopardstar, you can't. Not right now, not against our clan-mates." The scornfulness in Mistyfoot's voice was clear.

Leopardstar lashed her tail.

"Respect is exactly the problem," she hissed. "They have lost all respect for me, and how can I expect to regain it, if you have to swoop in and defend me at every turn! All that accomplishes is to make them respect *you* and view me as a helpless kit in need of saving, unable to even stand up for myself."

"No, that's not it at all," Mistyfoot said, a hint of a growl rumbling beneath her words. "You won't regain their respect with fangs and claws and shows of strength. When I defend you, that doesn't make them think that you're weak. The reason you don't have their respect is because they feel like you don't care about them!"

Leopardstar snorted at the absurdity of Mistyfoot's words.

"Don't be ridiculous!" she said. "Of course I care about them!"

"Well you have a funny way of showing it," Mistyfoot said, her eyes narrowing critically. "You gave the rule of our Clan over to Tigerstar. And, now when you should be making amends for that and showing that you are fully devoted to your clan-mates, you are instead lethargic and withdrawn. When you *do* speak to the Clan, it's only to yell at someone. You spend most of your day sleeping or lying in the sun alone. The only cat you seem to be able to hold a conversation with at all is Mudfur."

The fur down Leopardstar's back bristled as defensiveness surged through her.

"So why do you spend so much time with only him? Are you sick?" Mistyfoot demanded.

"No!" Leopardstar barked sharply.

A trickle of icy fear ran down her spine at the thought of Mistyfoot finding out about her pregnancy now, before she was ready to tell anyone.

"Then you have no excuse!" Mistyfoot snapped, rising to her paws. "There's no reason for you to be so distant. It's like your head is in the clouds when now more than ever should be completely focused on the Clan!"

Leopardstar's paws pricked with worry.

"I *am* focused on the clan," Leopardstar replied, but the argument sounded weak, even to her own ears.

A part of her wanted to go on, and tell Mistyfoot the truth. How she was expecting kits, and how the pregnancy was weighing on her. How she felt paralyzed at every turn, trying to decide what was best for the Clan.

"You don't act like it," Mistyfoot shot back. "When was the last time you went on a patrol with our clan-mates? Talked to them? Took an interest in the apprentices? Featherpaw and Stormpaw are reaching the end of their training. Where you even aware of that?"

Leopardstar's worry faded as instead hot anger started to fill her at Mistyfoot's insolent tone.

"Don't you try to order me around too, Mistyfoot. As you said, I am RiverClan's leader. Not you," Leopardstar growled, allowing some of her fangs to flash.

"Then start acting like it!" Mistyfoot snapped, before turning around and stalking out of the den without another word.

- -

Leopardstar dreamt of Stonefur. For once, it wasn't a nightmare about his death, which was how most of her dreams about him normally went. Instead she dreamt of a time moons before that, when she was a new leader, and Stonefur her new deputy.

He was laughing at something, although now, Leopardstar couldn't remember what he had found so funny. Maybe it was something his new apprentice Stormpaw did, or maybe another warrior had made a perfectly timed joke that struck him just right.

Leopardstar thought maybe the memory stuck with her since it was a somewhat unusual sight. Stonefur was normally rather straight-faced and serious about everything. But, on that green-leaf evening, his bright blue eyes glinted and his board shoulders shook with amusement, and it made Leopardstar think, that in that moment, he looked rather like Oakheart.

Oakheart had been a much more jovial cat than Stonefur, and, truthfully, most of the time Leopardstar had trouble telling that her steel-grey deputy and the reddish-brown tabby had even been related. Except when Stonefur laughed, then he looked just like his father.

In the dream-memory, Stonefur's smiling blue eyes searched out Leopardstar in the crowd of cats lounging around camp and met his gaze with hers, his eyes shimmering as if he wanted to share his amusement with her through them. Leopardstar purred back at him, warmth spreading through her chest. And, for a moment, everything felt right in the world.

- -

Leopardstar awoke alone in her nest on a cold winter morning.

More than a half a moon had elapsed since her conversation with Mudfur about what she should say to the Clan about the kits, and Leopardstar knew her time was running out in more ways than one. The pregnancy was starting to show on her body. Her paws felt slow and clumsy, and her belly was growing more plump. Everyday she feared that one of her clan-mates would look at her and recognize the signs, leading her to finally confront them... but so far, no one had.

Honestly, she half-wished that they would. At least in that case, it would force her to do *something,* instead of just leaving her stuck here in this horrid mire of indecision, utterly paralyzed and

miserable.

Mudfur had gone to the Moonstone at the half-moon only a few sunrises ago. That had also been a nerve-wracking occasion for Leopardstar. She couldn't help but thinking about Stonefur seeking Mudfur out in StarClan, and what terrible things he would say about her to her father. Or, about Mudfur receiving horrible prophecies about Leopardstar, and how she'd lead RiverClan to ruin.

Leopardstar buried her face in her paws.

Mudfur had said nothing to Leopardstar when he returned, about anything good or bad. Leopardstar couldn't decide if that was a good omen or a terrible one.

Oh StarClan, what should I do? Leopardstar lamented, squeezing her eyes shut tightly.

Maybe I should ask Mudfur about his visit to StarClan... he may be able to bring me some comfort. It must be better to know than not know... right?

Leopardstar rose out of her nest, giving her pelt a shake. She braced herself, then walked out of the den and into the cold leaf-bare air. An icy breeze nipped at her whiskers as she swiftly padded across camp and towards the medicine cat's den. The camp was empty currently. It was getting colder and colder by the day, so cats that weren't patrolling or hunting currently preferred to stay inside their cozy dens. This didn't bother Leopardstar much; she had been trying to do the same, albeit her motives were to hide that fact that her body was showing increasingly obvious signs that she's expecting kits, rather than to stay out of the cold.

"Mudfur?" Leopardstar called at the entrance to his den, but didn't wait for a response before pushing her way inside.

Mudfur was sitting in the center of his den, many different kinds of dried herbs at his paws. He seemed to have been sifting through his stores.

"Hello Leopardstar," he said without looking up from the leaves in front of him, his paws dexterously sorting the leaves into neat piles. "This early frost is not doing my herb stores any favors. I'm low on both tansy and catmint, and I can't find any living plants in our territory. I hope sickness stays away from our camp this season. I won't be able to cure any cases of green-cough without catmint."

Mudfur shook his head like he was trying to dislodge the unpleasant thoughts. He looked up from the herbs.

"But, enough about that. What can I do for you? How are you feeling?" he meowed, rising to his paws to pad over and give her a thorough exam, circling her.

"I'm tired but fine." Leopardstar waved her tail at Mudfur to shoo him away.

"Being tired is normal," he meowed, taking a seat again in front of her.

Leopardstar's ears flattened, and she ignored him. She didn't want to talk about the pregnancy.

"I wanted to ask you about your journey to the Moonstone," she said. "Did StarClan share anything of importance with you?"

"You know that StarClan's conversations with their medicine cats are private," Mudfur chided lightly.

"Yes, yes," Leopardstar said, a hint of impatience in her voice. "But, these are stressful times... I was just hoping..."

"For something to set your mind at ease?" Mudfur suggested gently.

"Or, to know if something disastrous is about to befall us," Leopardstar responded drily with a tail twitch. "I would need to know either way."

"You know that I would tell you if I was told anything that affected you or the Clan," Mudfur said.

Leopardstar sighed softly.

She wanted to believe him. She never once doubted Mudfur's loyalty to her or their Clan... but she did have a nagging doubt about if he would be totally truthful to her if StarClan told him something horrible about her. After all, he was her father. It was in his nature to try to protect her.

Either way though, it was clear that she wouldn't be getting anymore information about it. Her father was a stubborn cat. It would only waste both his time and hers if she tried to needle it out of him.

"Very well. Thank you," Leopardstar said, turning to leave.

"Wait. Is that all you wanted to ask me about?" Mudfur said.

Leopardstar turned her head to look at him from over her shoulder and blinked her eyes in a way that said *yes.* Mudfur stared at her hard, his expression unamused.

"Have you come to a decision...?" he meowed, widening his eyes at her meaningfully.

Leopardstar clenched her jaw, hearing Mudfur's unsaid words as clearly as if he'd yowled them.

'...About the kits?'

Leopardstar sighed again.

"No," she grumbled, taking another step away, but Mudfur pressed the issue.

"You can't stop them from coming you know," he said.

"I am aware," Leopardstar hissed through her teeth. "But, what do you want me to say? That I'm excited to have them? To be a mother? To make my clan-mates hate me more than they already do?"

"Things don't have to be as world shattering as you seem to insist on making it, Leopardstar," Mudfur huffed, his patience fading. "You have options. The Clan doesn't have to know their true father. You

don't even have to spend all your time in the nursery with them. I'm sure there are plenty of queens that would be happy to watch over them for you while you attend to your duties—"

"We've been through this all before," Leopardstar hissed, cutting him off. "You don't understand. It's not about 'how things maybe work out okay.' There's no room for 'maybe.' It doesn't matter if I want these kits or not. What matters is that I have to do everything in my power to put my Clan first."

Leopardstar looked away from him.

"Because I've been doing a really horrid job at doing that lately. I have to make it up to them somehow," she mumbled.

"But, Leopardstar, taking care of the Clan doesn't mean having to sacrifice all of your happiness," Mudfur said, his voice becoming more gentle.

Leopardstar felt something snap inside of her.

"What makes you think these kits would make me happy?" Leopardstar snarled, whirling on Mudfur.

"You saw what their father is like, you don't think they might end up like him? That they might ruin RiverClan? Tigerstar and I've already started the job, all they've got to do is finish it!" Leopardstar spat, her eyes wild and wide.

"Calm down," Mudfur hissed through his fangs.

Leopardstar forced herself to take a step back from him. She shook her head fiercely. She knew she was being irrational and that her father didn't deserve to be yowled at, but at the same time, she couldn't help it. She just felt all the bitter, hurt, sad, horrible feelings swirling violently inside her like an out-of-control hurricane. And, she was just a cat; how could Mudfur expect her to control it? All she could do was cower beneath the black clouds. Completely at their mercy.

"You know what would make me happy?" Leopardstar growled. "To go back before all this. Before TigerClan. Before Tigerstar. *All of it."*

Mudfur stepped closer to her, brushing his tail over her side reassuringly, although Leopardstar remained tense and stiff.

"Not even StarClan can turn back time. No one can take the dead, dry, brown leaves off of the ground and put them back onto the trees and make them alive again. No matter how much we want to sometimes." Mudfur murmured. "But, you know what does happen? Every leaf-bare becomes new-leaf, which becomes green-leaf."

Mudfur's amber eyes searched Leopardstar's.

"I know it seems impossible right now. But, one day you will look around, and you will realize that, somehow, the trees have leaves on them again," Mudfur said in a deep, solemn voice.

He touched his muzzle to Leopardstar's cheek.

"And, everything will be okay," he murmured.

Leopardstar screwed her eyes shut, her emotions sweeping uncontrollably over her again. But, this time, instead of feeling like screaming, she felt like wailing like a lost kit. She squashed the urge and buried her face into Mudfur's neck and shoulder instead. She stayed like that for several moments, trying to get her trembling breaths under control. When she finally lifted her head, all she felt was drained and numb. She gazed into Mudfur's eyes, her whiskers drooping.

"But, how will I ever get to that new green-leaf, when I can't make amends for the things I've done?" she whispered.

Before Mudfur could respond, Leopardstar turned and strode out of the den.

Part 2

Leopardstar called a Clan meeting at sunset. She was crouched over in a way she hoped hid her growing stomach, and even as she waited for her clan-mates to gather at her call, she could tell her heart wasn't in it. Guilt prickled sharp claws at her sides as she was reminded of Mistyfoot's accusation of being distant. She was right; Leopardstar really was just going through the motions. But, if the choice was going through the motions or doing nothing at all, hadn't she picked correctly?

I'm doing my best, Leopardstar hissed at the cloud of guilt and self-doubt swirling in her mind.

Leopardstar perched on the tree stump near the edge of the camp, where RiverClan leaders traditionally called their Clan meetings from. But, she couldn't stop her gaze from tracking across camp to the now mossy ground where the Bonepile used to be. She blinked, and for a moment, it was like she went back in time.

The towering pile of bones loomed over the camp, their reeking, rotting scent choking her lungs and sticking in the back of Leopardstar's throat. Tigerstar perched on top of the pile, his bright amber eyes narrowed as he looked downward in disgust. Stonefur, Stormpaw, and Featherpaw cowered beneath him at the foot of the Bonepile, hollowed out in their skin, their grey pelts just barely clinging to their skeletons.

Tigerstar flicked his tail, and Darkstripe took a pace towards the prisoners. Stonefur suddenly surged to life, summoning strength from some deep, unknown recesses of his being to put himself between Darkstripe and the apprentices, a fierce snarl on his lips.

Meanwhile, Leopardstar crouched halfway up the Bonepile, her gaze carefully blank... doing nothing to stop the horror unfolding before her.

Tigerstar's deep voice rang in her ears as he laid out Stonefur's test.

"Prove your loyalty. Rid TigerClan of these two half-Clan apprentices."

Stonefur didn't respond to him. Instead he turned his gaze onto Leopardstar.

When his blue eyes met her amber, a current of electricity shot through Leopardstar's body. Blood sloshed violently in her ears as her pounding heartbeat ticked up in speed. The thundering of every beat made it near impossible for her to hear what he asked her. But, words were hardly necessary— Stonefur's thoughts were written plainly across his face.

When he stared at her, his eyes overflowed with pain and betrayal. But, they also glittered with a tiny bit of hope. Despite it all, some part of Stonefur still believed in the cat who had once been his closest friend.

Stonefur's eyes seemed to sear into Leopardstar's very soul.

***Do something,** they challenged her.*

Leopardstar wasn't sure if their gazes held for an eternity or for less than a second.

Please...

Help me.

Leopardstar looked away.

Stonefur roared his defiance.

Tigerstar gave the order.

"Kill him."

Leopardstar flinched, and she found herself back on the tree stump.

She looked to the ground in front of her. Stormpaw and Featherpaw were standing before her, just like they had then. But, this time their pelts were sleek and healthy, despite the leaf-bare that locked the forest in its jaws, and their eyes weren't sunken into their skulls, although their gazes were all guarded. Featherpaw's was more openly hostile towards Leopardstar than her brother's. Stormpaw looked cautious, but slightly warmer. Leopardstar's gaze flickered to Mistyfoot and she found her deputy studying her face carefully.

Mistyfoot's eyes narrowed, and Leopardstar felt a chill creep up her spine. She couldn't help but think that Mistyfoot had somehow read her thoughts and knew she had been thinking about the Bonepile.

Stormpaw had been Stonefur's apprentice. After his death, Mistyfoot had taken over completing his training along with training Featherpaw. A warrior having two apprentices was rather unorthodox, but after the battle with BloodClan, the day after the three of them rejoined RiverClan, Mistyfoot had announced to Leopardstar that she would complete training Stormpaw alongside Featherpaw, and Leopardstar hadn't had the heart to disagree with her.

"Thank you for coming," Leopardstar murmured to address the Clan, beginning the ceremony. "Today marks the making of two new warriors."

Leopardstar's gaze flickered back to Mistyfoot's. She already knew how he deputy would respond, but tradition demanded that she still ask her.

"Mistyfoot, have these two apprentices successfully completed their training and are ready to become warriors?" Leopardstar said.

Mistyfoot nodded decisively.

"Yes," she responded in a curt voice, but when she glanced over at the two younger cats at her side, her demeanor softened.

"They have already gone through more difficult trials in their young lives than many senior warriors have," Mistyfoot continued, and Leopardstar tried vainly to keep her face expressionless as she realized Mistyfoot was referring to TigerClan. "And, they fought nobly and fiercely in the battle against BloodClan. They are more than fit to receive their warrior names."

Leopardstar swallowed hard and nodded, fighting hard to not let the turmoil she felt inside show in her expression.

"Very well. Stormpaw, Featherpaw, please step forward," Leopardstar said.

Mistyfoot backed away and watched Stormpaw and Featherpaw with a look of motherly pride as they approached the base of the stump.

"I, Leopardstar, leader of RiverClan, call upon StarClan to look down at these two apprentices. They've trained hard and battled heroically in the defense of your noble code, and I commend them to you as warriors in their turn," Leopardstar said, looking out across the camp, but careful to keep her eyes away from the location where the Bonepile once stood.

"Stormpaw, Featherpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your lives?" Leopardstar asked, her gaze flickering back down to them.

They both looked resolutely up at her.

"I do," Stormpaw's voice rang confidently out through the camp.

"I do," Featherpaw echoed right behind.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior names," Leopardstar said, "Featherpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Feathertail. StarClan honors your loyalty and your patience. Stormpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Stormfur, in honor of your fallen mentor. StarClan honors your loyalty and your determination. We welcome you both as full warriors of RiverClan."

The Clan burst into raucous cheers for the new warriors.

When Stormfur and Feathertail had first joined RiverClan as kits, there had been an undercurrent of unease at their half-ThunderClan parentage. But, after their suffering during the reign of TigerClan, the attitude towards them swung very dramatically in the opposite direction, and now the two young cats were as well loved by the Clan as much as Leopardstar was detested.

Leopardstar stepped down from the stump, watching from a distance as the new warriors were mobbed by an adoring Clan. She had a sense that even if she tried, she wouldn't be welcomed in

their revelry. To her surprise, Mistyfoot approached her instead of immediately going over to congratulate Stormfur and Feathertail. Leopardstar swept her tail self-consciously over her stomach.

"You didn't tell me you were planning on naming Stormfur after Stonefur," Mistyfoot said in a low voice.

Leopardstar shrugged.

"I thought Stormfur would appreciate it," she responded.

Mistyfoot shot her a look out of narrowed eyes like she didn't entirely believe her.

Leopardstar wondered if Mistyfoot thought there was a more calculating element to her naming pick, like Leopardstar had done it not to honor Stonefur, but just as a stunt to win some of the approval of her clan-mates back.

Leopardstar winced to herself.

Well, if that is what she thinks, can I blame her?

Mistyfoot didn't say anything else. She just stalked away from Leopardstar to push through the crowd to get to the new warriors. Leopardstar watched the deputy's attitude change completely as she saw them and greeted them with purrs and affectionate licks on the head. Stormfur playfully shoved her away, while Feathertail twined herself around Mistyfoot delightedly.

Leopardstar tilted her head, watching their interactions with curiosity.

She didn't know how she never noticed it before, but it seemed like Mistyfoot saw the two of them as her kits, and in return, they too viewed her like a surrogate mother.

Leopardstar shook her head.

Admittedly, it made perfect sense. The more Leopardstar thought about it, the more she saw there were plenty of hints and clues from the moment the kits had joined RiverClan. Mistyfoot had been

Silverstream's best friend, so it was natural she felt an affection towards them. Then, Mistyfoot had been so protective over the apprentices that she insisted on being the mentor to both of them after her brother died. They were, of course, also bonded by their mutual half-ThunderClan parentage, and the trauma they experienced together in TigerClan. It was *so obvious* in fact that it was all the more startlingly that Leopardstar had been totally oblivious to the connection between the three cats up until now.

Leopardstar sighed softly to herself. Was she really so caught up in her own problems that she couldn't see what's right in front of her nose?

It was early morning and Leopardstar was curled up in her den, her tail brushing her nose. Her eyes were half-lidded, but she wasn't quite sleeping. She was rather uncomfortable from her swollen stomach, which periodically woke her up throughout the night.

It was basically impossible to hide her belly now, which was why Leopardstar had confined herself, alone to her den for the past half-moon. She had blamed a lingering case of green-cough, leaving her duties to Mistyfoot and trusting Mudfur to bring her meals.

Mudfur had estimated that the kits would be born any day now. He had also stopped asking her about what her plan was with them; he seemed to have resigned himself to that fact that Leopardstar would not do anything until she was physically forced to.

Which would be soon, because Leopardstar could tell the kits wouldn't wait for much longer. She could sense a deep-rooted instinctual urge inside of her to seek out a safe, secluded place and build a nest there to give birth in. Although Leopardstar tried fiercely to ignore the feeling, it remained nagging at the back of her mind, like an itch that should couldn't quite scratch.

In Leopardstar's half-sleeping state her mind meandered aimlessly, images forming in her head almost like waking dreams, swirling and blending together. First she saw Bluestar, ThunderClan's old leader with two small kits at her belly; Mistyfoot and Stonefur. Bluestar's face looked tired and conflicted and Leopardstar imagined she was readying herself to give her kits away to RiverClan. But,

then Bluestar blurred and changed, turning into Mistyfoot, who was looking down lovingly at a kit-aged Feathertail and Stormfur, two young half-RiverClan, half-ThunderClan cats just like herself. Mistyfoot bent her head to nuzzle them affectionately. The image then warped again, and Mistyfoot turned golden-furred and dappled. Leopardstar ended up looking at an image of herself with a few indistinct kits curled up at her belly. She couldn't properly make out their size or number, but she could discern that at least one was golden-furred, and another dark tabby. Kits that were, by blood, half-RiverClan and half-ThunderClan, just like Mistyfoot, Stonefur, Feathertail and Stormfur.

The Leopardstar in the vision looked exhausted and haggard. Her clan-mates suddenly appeared, surrounding Leopardstar and the newborns, and Mistyfoot approached, looking down at the Leopardstar with the kits in disgust.

"Was it worth it? To choose that monster over your Clan?" Mistyfoot asked, her voice echoing in Leopardstar's ears like she was speaking from somewhere far away.

"My crimes and Tigerstar's don't matter here. These kits are innocent from the actions of their parents," the other Leopardstar argued back, her voice also strangely hollow.

"Regardless, that doesn't change the fact that they carry your blood and Tigerstar's. And, that doesn't change the fact that you would rather raise them, than help lead our Clan. You chose them over our clan-mates. Just like how you chose Tigerstar over Stonefur. RiverClan continues to suffer and suffer, all from your selfishness," Mistyfoot hissed.

"No," the other Leopardstar said, her eyes wide as Mistyfoot turned aside, walking off.

The rest of her Clan looked at them with burning hatred in their eyes, turning to follow Mistyfoot away, leaving the two Leopardstar's and her kits all alone.

"No!"

"No—" Leopardstar gasped, her eyes flying open.

Her heart was hammering in her chest, and her feet were scrabbling on the mossy ground like she had been trying to run after them. It was still early morning, just past dawn, and Leopardstar still didn't have any kits at her side. Leopardstar heaved a deep breath in.

It's okay. It was all a dream.

For a moment, she felt a wave of relief crash over her. But, the feeling was closely followed by a rush of fearful nausea.

It may just be a dream now, but it could be reality very soon.

If she ended up having those kits here in RiverClan.

Leopardstar bowed her head, panting slightly from the anxiety that swirled inside her. What was she doing?! Her time had almost run out.

The conversations she had with Mistyfoot came back to her. Leopardstar remembered how her deputy told her how RiverClan needed Leopardstar to be more involved. How she had to be, to make up for the pain she had caused her clan-mates.

I can't do that if I have these kits.

Leopardstar set her jaw, her eyes stinging as the weight of the realization settled down on her.

She finally knew what had to be done. There was no away around it. She couldn't have these kits in RiverClan. She couldn't have these kits at all. As far as anyone knew... For her sake and for RiverClan's.

A plan started to form in her mind. She would have to leave camp for a few days at least, so she would have time to find a stranger to leave her kits with once they were born. Then once the kits had a new mother, Leopardstar would go back to camp.

Leopardstar had never thought of herself as a particularly maternal cat, but she still felt a pang in her chest at the thought of leaving the kits with a different cat, a rogue or a kitty-pet most likely.

*They are **mine,** and they are clan-cats! How can I just get rid of them?!*

Leopardstar shook her head like she was trying to shake away the thought.

These aren't just any kits; they carry a dark legacy. She argued with herself.

RiverClan would be better off without them. And, besides... they deserve a better mother than me. Someone who won't resent them for the memories they carry just from the nature of their birth. I'll find someone who can be a good mother to them. Someone who is like how Mistyfoot is with Stormfur and Feathertail.

Leopardstar swallowed hard.

She had no time to waste. She may have waited too long already. Leopardstar rose to her paws.

She padded to the entrance of her den, shooting furtive glances across the camp before emerging. She was grateful to see that the camp was quiet and empty. The dawn patrol had already headed out, but the rest of the warriors hadn't roused themselves yet to go patrolling and hunting. Good. She could avoid any awkward questions about where she was going or if she was still "sick" or why her stomach looked like that.

Leopardstar's first stop was the fresh-kill pile. She knew she needed to eat to keep her energy up for the long journey out of her territory, where ever she ended up going. She quickly scarfed down a water-vole, and after she finished eating, Leopardstar headed to the medicine cat's den.

She found Mudfur still asleep in his nest, his dark brown tail covering his muzzle. Leopardstar put her paw on his shoulder and unceremoniously shook her father awake.

Mudfur's eyes flickered open blearily, but when he saw Leopardstar, he sprung up, immediately awake.

"Leopardstar! Is something wrong?" he asked, his gaze dark with concern as he searched her serious face.

Leopardstar shook her head.

"I can tell my time is getting closer," Leopardstar said, her voice low. "The kits will be born in a few days at the most."

Mudfur knew all this already. His brow furrowed in confusion as he waited for her to elaborate.

Leopardstar looked away from him, unable to meet his gaze.

"I'm leaving camp. Tell the Clan that I'm feeling better, but I've gone to the Moonstone to speak with our ancestors," Leopardstar said, the reasonable excuse for her absence coming to her easily. "When I return I... I... I will be alone."

Mudfur's eyes stretched wide in shock as he understood what she was saying.

"Leopardstar, you can't!" he exclaimed. "Whatever you think, those kits are innocent!"

"No! They aren't. They are my mistake..." Leopardstar's head drooped.

She started down at the ground for a moment.

"I will find someone else to care for them in the way that I can't," she continued in a soft voice. "A kind rogue. Or maybe a two-leg that wants some new kitty-pets."

"You must tell the Clan," Mudfur insisted.

"I won't," Leopardstar responded swiftly, clenching her teeth as she lifted her head to look him in the eye. "I'm doing this for RiverClan, Mudfur, can't you see? It has to be this way. I can't have these kits. They can't be mine."

Leopardstar turned away from him.

"Tell Mistyfoot and the Clan what I said," Leopardstar murmured. "I'm going alone to Highstones to consult with StarClan. I will be back in a few days at the most. Of course, Mistyfoot is in charge until I return."

"Kitting can be dangerous. Leopardstar, please. Let me at least come with you," Mudfur pleaded.

There was something in his voice, an undercurrent of sorrow and tragedy to his words.

Leopardstar's mind flashed back as she remembered how Mudfur had lost his mate and two kits, her siblings, when her mother's kitting had gone horribly wrong. Leopardstar had been the only survivor.

Leopardstar felt a pang of sympathy in her chest for her father, but she knew she had to stand resolute. She shook her head.

"I must go alone. The Clan needs their medicine cat here more than I do," she said firmly, before softening her voice. "Don't worry father. You will not lose me like you lost my mother; I have many lives to spare. You will see me again in just a few sunrises."

Leopardstar padded towards the entrance of the den.

"Wait!" her father called.

Leopardstar paused. Mudfur dashed towards the back of the den to grab some herbs, which he then carried over to Leopardstar.

"If you insist on doing this, at least eat these," Mudfur murmured, placing them at her paws. "They will give you strength for your journey."

Leopardstar bowed her head and lapped up the bitter leaves. Mudfur watched her with somber eyes as she did so.

After she had finished the herbs, Leopardstar turned back towards him and pressed her muzzle to Mudfur's cheek in farewell. She felt him trembling.

"Goodbye, Leopardstar," he mumbled, his voice sad and tired. "I will see you soon."

"I love you, Mudfur," Leopardstar murmured, screwing her eyes shut.

"I love you too, my daughter," he whispered. "Be safe."

Leopardstar chose to travel in the direction of Highstones. She could've picked to leave her territory in any direction, but she didn't want to risk the possibility of being caught by two-legs if she entered directly into the dense two-leg place behind RiverClan and ThunderClan territory. But, she also didn't feel like making any sort of perilous journey across ShadowClan land to the unknown territory beyond. And, if she walked in the direction of Highstones, she won't be questioned by any Clan cat she came across, so it seemed by far the best bet.

It was now well past sun-high, and she was trekking across the moor, having just passed the edge of WindClan territory and into the unclaimed land beyond.

The long walk left Leopardstar with plenty of time to think, and contemplate on just how exactly her actions had gotten herself here, in this exact moment, very uncomfortably pregnant and alone and miserable and walking to Highstones.

The irony that Leopardstar was carrying half-Clan kits, just like the cats Tigerstar had tried to execute during his leadership of TigerClan was not lost on Leopardstar. But, Leopardstar knew just what he would say to her too, if she had known that she was expecting kits earlier and had brought up her reservations to him back when he was still alive.

"They aren't half-clan," Tigerstar's low voice murmured. "We are all one Clan now. They will be the first kits of this new Clan, and with their birth, they will mark the dawning of a new era— the age of TigerClan. One in which all of the cats of the forest will live together in harmony."

And, Leopardstar would have believed him wholeheartedly. Like a fool.

Leopardstar shook her head fiercely, trying to shake the sound of his voice, deep and smooth like poisoned honey, out of her mind. Ever since Scourge ripped his nine lives out of him all at once, Leopardstar had tried so hard not to think about him. She had been doing an okay job at it too. She had enough problems going on in

her Clan to keep her plenty distracted, then when she discovered she was expecting kits, what she was going to do about them consumed the rest of her mental energy.

But, now that she was alone, away from her Clan, she felt the ghost of Tigerstar walking near her, pressing relentlessly closer, and her memories of him were flooding her mind.

Leopardstar growled quietly to herself. Tigerstar was such a hypocrite and a liar, and she had been so weak to listen to him. He was ThunderClan turned ShadowClan, which almost made him half-Clan himself, yet he when he revealed Stonefur and Mistyfoot's parentage to her, he had somehow convinced her with his forked tongue that her half-Clan clan-mates were the ones that couldn't be trusted. He had isolated her from them, and then whispered insecurities in her ears, flaring up prejudice inside her to turn her against them. Then he had flipped it around, and with the same ease, charmed her so she had turned a blind eye to any misgivings against him.

He never wanted all the cats in the forest to live together in peace. All he wanted was power. The power to rule over all of us, and the power to decide who lives and who dies.

A red haze of anger filled her mind at the thought. As Leopardstar walked, she unsheathed her claws. She wished she could dig them into Tigerstar's lying pelt, and she wished that she had seen the truth sooner, so she could have been the one that slashed him into pieces instead of Scourge.

But, in the same heartbeat as she wished that, Leopardstar also knew she wouldn't have been able to do it. Leopardstar growled furiously.

Despite it all, she had loved him, and that had given him a power over her that no other cat had. As much as she wished that if she saw him today, she would be able to stand up to him, she couldn't be totally sure that she would be able to do it. She wasn't totally sure that Tigerstar wouldn't be able to get her to meekly lie down at his feet with just one word.

The fury and frustration building inside of her reached a breaking point at that thought, and Leopardstar turned to a nearby piece of heather to maul it savagely. After she had decimated the plant, she rose back to her paws, panting slightly from the excursion that her body, in her current state, was currently very unequipped for. Leopardstar sighed heavily, pausing in her journey across the moor for a moment to stare down at the chewed and shedded leaves.

She wasn't used to feeling so weak and cowardly, like she did now anytime she thought of Tigerstar. Her whole life, from her birth up until the moment that she met him, she thought she was so strong. She was the only kit of her litter to survive. As an apprentice, she had conquered her fear of water to become the best swimmer and fisher of the group she trained with. As a warrior, she rose above the rest to become deputy. But, now as leader, she felt entirely worthless.

She had believed Tigerstar when he said he wanted to make the forest a better place. And, she had believed that he loved her.

Pathetic.

She dug her claws furiously into the ground. She wasn't sure if Tigerstar had ever said anything to her that wasn't a lie.

Leopardstar forced her feet forward again.

He would've been right about one thing at least— these kits do embody TigerClan, and they will be reminders of that to any cat that looks at them. Which is exactly why I can't keep them.

Still, Leopardstar felt a wave of guilt crash over her. Despite all of her thoughts about how other cats would see her kits, she knew that the kits themselves had done nothing wrong. They hadn't asked to come into existence. Mudfur was right about that— in that way they were innocent.

At least, for right now, another thought whispered doubtfully in the back of her mind.

Her ears flattened. What insurance did she have that they wouldn't

turn out like their father? What if they had the same hunger for power and the same ruthlessness that allowed them to do whatever it took to claim it?

Leopardstar shook her head. She couldn't risk it. She had to do what Mistyfoot said. She had to do what she hadn't before.

She had to put her Clan first. It was the only way to repent.

Leopardstar swiped her tongue around her lips, her mouth suddenly feeling very dry.

It would be the first step at least... but how far would she have to go to make it up to them?

As Leopardstar walked, she spotted a large two-leg structure in the distance. She vaguely remembered that it was called something like a "barn." The thought of heading there to have her kits was tempting. It was far enough from the two-legs to allow her to give birth in peace, but close enough that the two-legs could easily find and care for the kits once it was time for her to return to the Clan.

But, Leopardstar knew that couldn't be possible. The former ThunderClan cat, Ravenpaw lived in that barn. She knew Firestar still went to visit his old friend from time to time, and she couldn't let the knowledge of her kits to get back to any of the Clans, or else it might find its way back to hers.

Leopardstar felt the familiar, heavy boulder of guilt settle on her shoulders, and her steps faltered. Was this really the right choice? Fleeing from her Clan, lying and sneaking off to hide her dark secret like a fugitive? What kind of leader was she?

She closed her eyes for a moment.

What would my clan-mates think if they knew the truth? And, what must StarClan think of me? They must hate me for what I've done to RiverClan.

Leopardstar shuddered. Maybe this wasn't the right choice at all. Maybe she should submit herself to her Clan and to StarClan and await their judgement.

That thought stirred up another one, nagging in the back of Leopardstar's mind...

It was the terrible doubt that she had pushed away to the darkest corner of her being and refused to acknowledge for so long. But, it would hide from her no longer.

Her greatest fear flooded her, making her blood run cold.

I'm not worthy to lead RiverClan. I'm hardly worthy to be a RiverClan cat anymore.

Leopardstar's throat closed up, and she blinked hard.

It would be the worst thing that could ever happen to her— not to lose her leadership of RiverClan, that should would manage to survive, but to be banished from RiverClan entirely.

Still though... could she deny that it wouldn't be a suitable punishment for her? Moons ago, before TigerClan, before Tigerstar, if someone asked her what punishment she would give to someone who imprisoned and starved four of her clan-mates and then killed Stonefur in cold-blood, *exile* would have been the lightest punishment on her mind. But, here she was, having gotten away with it without a figurative scratch on her pelt.

Leopardstar's gaze lifted to the jagged peaks of Highstones that were looming closer and closer. Her heart twisted in her chest.

Although the Moonstone first had just been an excuse to allow her to leave her camp for a few days, she now felt a pull inside her to actually go to the sacred site. She could seek the judgement she needed. She could know if she was doing the right thing.

Bile rose up in the back of Leopardstar's throat as she had the sudden thought of seeing Stonefur there.

She shuddered and looked down at her paws as she walked.

She didn't *have* to speak to StarClan. She could go the rest of her life without returning to the Moonstone, so she could avoid them and any punishment they demanded entirely, up until the moment of

her ninth death. After all, she knew they really couldn't stop her here in the physical world. If they could, wouldn't they have destroyed Brokenstar or Tigerstar or BloodClan a long time ago, before they caused so much suffering?

Her paws itched. The temptation to turn away was powerful.

*What if they **do** want me to leave RiverClan? Why should I go speak to them just to cause myself more pain and suffering?* A selfish part of her whispered.

Then Leopardstar again heard Tigerstar's voice rumbling in her mind:

"You're a TigerClan leader. You don't bow to StarClan," Tigerstar said, a hint of a growl in his voice. "No cat, living or dead is above you."

Leopardstar's heart was suddenly filled with fierce outrage and anger— at Tigerstar and at herself for her weakness. She clenched her jaw, giving her head a fierce shake.

***No**. I'm not like him.*

Leopardstar steadied her resolve and pushed forward.

It was a little past sunset as Leopardstar approached the gaping, dark mouth that formed the entrance to the tunnel down to the Moonstone. A wave of nervousness crashed down on her as she stared into the black abyss, and for a moment, she felt her resolve wane again.

Would it be so bad to go back and live in ignorance?

She shook her head like she was trying to shake off the clinging doubts.

No, I have to speak with StarClan. How can I lead if I don't deserve it? How will I know that I have a right to earn the respect of my clan-mates back?

Leopardstar swallowed hard and stepped into the darkness.

As she walked down the long, winding tube, guided forward only by her whiskers, her thoughts swirled more and more chaotically in her mind the deeper she descended.

What if I speak to Stonefur? No. Why would he come? He won't want to see me, let alone speak to me. He won't give me the privilege of being able to apologize. He ***shouldn't.***

Then will it be Crookedstar? Oh StarClan, I hope not... those cats were his kin, and I imprisoned them. I've failed him so horribly that he must be so ashamed that he chose me as his successor...

Then who? My mother? I've failed even her. There's no one who I haven't shamed.

I'm a disgrace.

Embarrassment.

Unworthy.

Unworthy.

Unworthy.

Leopardstar's breaths rattled loudly in her ears, her thoughts growing increasingly disjointed and panicked, and she almost broke into a sprint as she finished the last leg of the journey downward and burst out into the cavern which housed the Moonstone. The large crystal was glowing faintly from the starlight that shone in from the hole in the ceiling above, and Leopardstar's racing heart slowed as she looked at it, like the stone itself had some sort of calming effect radiating from it.

Leopardstar took a shaky breath and approached the Moonstone. She crouched down next to the big crystal, closed her eyes, then without allowing herself to have another thought, shoved her muzzle against the icy stone.

The touch sent a frigid shock rocking through her, as if her body all at once turned to ice. She instinctively tried to yank her head back and open her eyes, but she found she couldn't move, her muscles

stiffened and paralyzed by the cold.

But, then as quickly as it came, the cold melted away and her muscles loosened. Leopardstar's eyes flickered open, and she found herself standing in a lush forest at the height of green-leaf. There was a riverbank of smooth grey stones in front of her that framed a small brook which snaked through the trees, babbling cheerfully. Leopardstar saw the silver flash of fish in the depths of the water, and her stomach growled, reminding her that he hadn't eaten since she left camp in the early morning.

Leopardstar's gaze followed the brook upstream, and found its source only a few fox lengths away from her; a spring trickling out of a tall pile of large stones. As Leopardstar's gaze moved higher, she saw a blue-grey cat perched at the top of the pile, watching her carefully.

"Stonefur," Leopardstar whispered, her voice barely louder than a rasp.

Leopardstar took a shaky breath, trying to remain upright on her suddenly violently trembling legs.

She almost didn't believe her eyes. She'd basically convinced herself that there was no way Stonefur would come, allow her the dignity of seeing his face... But, he was here, standing before her, looking as mighty as he did in life.

His ears were no longer in tatters like they had been the last time she saw him. His frame was no longer scrawny and shrunken by starvation. His pelt was no longer stained with blood and mud and marred by wounds and oozing sores. He stood proud and tall, his dark blue-grey fur gleaming, hints of stars sparkling around his paws and whiskers, and his blue eyes clear... and stony.

Stonefur deftly descended from the rock pile, landing on light paws next to the stream a few tail-lengths away from Leopardstar.

"Hello Leopardstar," he said in his deep meow.

Leopardstar had dearly missed the sound of his voice and hearing it

again was almost enough to collapse her already weak knees out from under her. She swallowed. Her throat and mouth were very dry, and she wasn't sure if she would be able to even make words come to speak to him. But, before she could even open her mouth to try to respond, Stonefur continued.

"Your stomach sounds hungry. Do you want to eat something?" he asked.

Leopardstar's thoughts were still scrambled in fear, shock, guilt, and anxiety, but she almost laughed out loud at the absurdity of his question. Her stomach growling was such a minor instance compared to the gravity of everything else that brought her here, but in a classic exceedingly-pragmatic Stonefur fashion, it was the first thing he addressed.

Stonefur didn't wait for her to wrangle her feelings under control and answer the question. He paused at the water's edge, becoming entirely still for a moment, before he sprung into motion and hooked a fish out of the brook with his claws. It landed right by Leopardstar's feet, and she instinctively slammed a paw down on it to kill it and stop it from struggling to get back to the water.

"Eat," Stonefur said to her with a nod.

Leopardstar's stomach grumbled loudly again, so she didn't try to protest. She bent her head and devoured the fish. The sweet and salty taste of it seemed to fill her body with strength and energy with every bite. Stonefur patiently waited for her to finish and didn't speak again until she lifted her head, swiping her tongue over her lips, her stomach warm and full.

"What brings you to StarClan's hunting grounds?" Stonefur asked.

Leopardstar hesitated, blinking hard as her now very full stomach twisted nauseatingly.

"...You must know, since you are the one here greeting me," Leopardstar rasped, finally managing to speak.

Stonefur inclined his head to her, as if inviting her to continue, but

he did not say anything in response. Leopardstar closed her eyes for a heartbeat and steeled herself with a shaky breath.

"I'm sorry," she blurted out, her eyes snapping back up.

Stonefur still said nothing, his expression unreadable.

"You died because of me. Because I was weak and stupid and cowardly. I was everything a leader shouldn't be. I betrayed the warrior code. I betrayed RiverClan. And, I betrayed you. And, I understand if you can't forgive me for that. I'm not even sure that you should..."

Leopardstar's throat began to close up in emotion, but she forced herself to continue.

"But, I just want you to know that I truly am so sorry. I'm sorry all the way down to my bones. I will carry this pain with me every day of my life. And, I deserve to, in punishment for what I did to you."

Stonefur's face was carefully devoid of emotion. Leopardstar searched his eyes desperately but found no hint of what he was feeling there.

"Please, believe me," she said, her voice cracking.

A part of her, the proud and cruel part of her that got her into this mess, hated the way she was begging. But, Leopardstar took a deep breath and pushed those feelings aside, waiting for Stonefur's response. He was still silent.

Her head drooped, cold resignation settling in her gut.

"...It's okay," she mumbled. "I understand. My words are just talk, right? That's why I have something else to ask you... I didn't just come here to apologize."

Leopardstar took another shaky breath.

"If it is your will and StarClan's, I wish to relinquish my position as leader of RiverClan, in reparations for my actions," Leopardstar said quietly. "Your sister will make a fine leader in my place. I no longer

deserve the duty and privilege to lead our Clan, but Mistyfoot does. I know she will not fail RiverClan as I have. I just beg that you have mercy on me and allow me to stay in RiverClan, so I can try to make amends for all the suffering I caused."

Leopardstar crouched low before Stonefur, her head bowed as she stared down at the ground, waiting for his response. Silence stretched between them for several moments, but then she saw his paws move towards her and felt his muzzle brush her forehead. Leopardstar's heartbeat hammered in her ears, and she closed her eyes, bracing herself for to feel her nine lives stripped away. She just prayed that Stonefur would not also utter the words of her banishment.

But, as the moments slipped past... nothing happened.

"It is not Mistyfoot's time yet to lead," Stonefur murmured, his breath stirring the fur on Leopardstar's head, making her eyes snap open. "But, it is yours."

Stonefur pulled his muzzle back, and Leopardstar raised her head to meet his gaze, her eyes wide in shock.

"Even after everything I've done?" Leopardstar asked hollowly, her ears flattening.

Stonefur nodded.

"I believe you and your regret, Leopardstar. I have seen it etched on every part of your pelt since my death. But, I have also seen how it has shaped you into becoming a wiser leader. More protective, more wary, and more devoted to our clan-mates," he said in his deep voice.

Stonefur paused for a moment.

"What's done is done and in the past. The important part is that what happened will never happen again. You have changed. I know you will be a good leader for RiverClan from now on. So, there is no need for you to give up your lives or your name," Stonefur said.

Leopardstar's gaze searched Stonefur's. She slowly shook her head,

her face incredulous.

"You've been watching our Clan, you must see the disarray it's in," Leopardstar said, her jaw clenched. "And, you think I'm the one that can help them? That I should keep going despite all my mistakes? How will I find the strength to manage it?"

Stonefur touched his tail-tip to her shoulder.

"As you said, my death was your mistake. But, we can learn from our mistakes. If you do not let it teach you... if you give up now, I will have died for no reason. Please don't let my death be in vain. When you need to find the strength to keep going, find it in honoring my life," Stonefur rumbled. "Do *not* fail me again, Leopardstar."

Leopardstar's paws trembled and her eyes began to sting.

"I won't," she whispered. "I will try. For you. I've—I've missed you Stonefur."

Stonefur's ears twitched backwards regretfully.

"I've missed our Clan as well," Stonefur murmured. "I would be lying if I said that I didn't often wish that... that things could've been different."

That you could still be alive... That I hadn't killed you.

Leopardstar's stomach twisted as she looked down at the ground again.

"If it is any consolation though, Leopardstar," Stonefur said, giving a quiet sigh. "I do forgive you."

Leopardstar's gaze flew back up to his. She wanted to say something to him, but strangely, she found it impossible to move. Her vision was fading around the edges, and Stonefur's form was blurring.

"I understand the magnitude of the sacrifice you are making with your kits, Leopardstar. Even if the rest of the Clan is ignorant of your pain, I know that you chose RiverClan, and I am grateful for it.

Go back home and keep leading. But, first, there is something else you must attend to..." Stonefur said as Leopardstar's vision turned to black.

Leopardstar awoke next to the now dim Moonstone to feel a contraction ripple down her side. She winced at the faint sting of pain it brought, but it faded quickly, only a warning of what was to come. A jolt of panic ran through her pelt.

The kits must be coming soon. I have to get going.

Leopardstar rose to her paws, and moving as rapidly as possible, she headed back up the tunnel.

Leopardstar was both surprised and grateful that her stomach somehow still felt full from the fish she ate in StarClan. She wouldn't have time to hunt before the kits came, and she needed her strength to make it through giving birth. After she emerged from the cave, to her shock, she found dawn already breaking, having somehow spent all night in StarClan's hunting grounds. Leopardstar headed as quickly as she could away from Mothermouth. Thankfully, her contractions were light and far apart, at least for now, so she made good time as she searched for a place to have her kits.

I didn't think they would be here so quickly. I thought I would have at least had another day after the Moonstone to look for someone to care for them.

Beyond Ravenpaw's barn, there was a sparse cropping of two-leg dens Leopardstar could see in the distance. She headed that way, hoping to find kind kitty-pets, loners or even two-legs who would be willing to take pity on her poor kits.

It was far after sunrise, but not yet sun-high when Leopardstar made it to the cluster of two-leg dens. She had made the journey alright, having only to stop to rest a few times when the contractions were too strong. But, now that she was so close to the strange two-leg structures, her pelt prickled with unease, and she felt the urge to turn back.

She may have made a mistake coming here, but it was too late to change her mind. She let out a hissed breath as another powerful contraction wracked her body. The kits would be here soon, like it or not.

Leopardstar crept through the yards, her jaws parted to scent the air for cats and two-legs alike. As Leopardstar walked past the fifth house, her nose picked up three cat scents—one male, two female, and one of the females had a hint of milk-scent on her. Leopardstar felt a jolt of relief.

Perfect. Now I just have to pray that they are welcoming kitty-pets.

Leopardstar followed the cat scent into one of the yards by a two-leg nest. She clawed her way under a holly bush there to hide her from sight from any passing two-legs. Her contractions were too powerful and too close together for her to continue now.

Leopardstar collapsed down on her side, panting. She peered out through the tightly woven holly branches, her gaze searching the barren, unfamiliar and strangely manicured yard surrounding her, and for a moment, she felt very scared and alone. Leopardstar swallowed hard, wishing that she had let Mudfur come with her like he wanted.

Then that thought and all other thoughts were stripped away as white hot, blinding pain tore through her body.

Leopardstar dug her claws into the ground, biting back a yowl. The pain that ripped through her was unlike any she ever felt before. Leopardstar clenched her jaw hard, the salty tang of blood filling her mouth as she accidentally bit through her tongue with her fangs. As her body shook from the agony, Leopardstar's thoughts were just coherent enough to wonder if this pain was StarClan's punishment for her actions.

Then the blinding pain faded almost as quickly as it came, leaving only a throbbing ache behind, allowing her a moment to catch her breath. But, before she could recover fully, it came roaring back like searing lightning. Leopardstar almost heaved up her stomach's contents from the torture of it.

Powerful waves were cascading down her sides, and she felt warm liquid soaking her hind-legs and tail. Leopardstar had just enough energy to angle her eyes back to see a crimson pool of blood rapidly forming around her.

It would have panicked her, if she had the mental capacity to feel panic. But, right now all she could concentrate on was pain and rapidly growing exhaustion.

A small bundle fell to the ground beside Leopardstar at the next contraction that surged though her body. Slowly and painfully, Leopardstar managed to pull the kit out of the pool of the blood and towards her, lapping at its spotted dark tabby coat. But, the kit didn't move despite Leopardstar's best efforts of grooming it. It had been born with a still heart.

It's probably better this way. Leopardstar thought, looking down at the motionless kit through blurry eyes, even though she still felt a pang of mourning in her chest.

The pain seemed to be fading, but so was Leopardstar's energy, and yet contractions still rippled powerfully down her sides. Thankfully, the last two kits came easily. Leopardstar slowly and with great effort tugged them towards her stomach, trying to lick her blood off of their pelts, clearing their eyes and noses. These two were already wiggling strongly, unlike their older brother.

The edges of Leopardstar's vision were starting to go black, and as she pushed her two living kits to her stomach, allowing them to nurse, she was vaguely aware that she still seemed to be bleeding, despite her waning contractions.

Leopardstar's head thumped to the ground suddenly, quite to her surprise. Her neck muscles strained as she tried to lift her head again, but she found she didn't have the strength. She felt oddly calm as her breaths rattled hollowly in her ears. Leopardstar was conscious just long enough to see that one of her kits, a little she-cat, was golden-spotted, just like her, before everything faded to darkness.

Leopardstar's eyes opened, and she found herself back in StarClan's

hunting grounds for the second time that day. Leopardstar slowly rose into a sitting position. Her muscles still strained at the excursion, but she found herself regaining energy steadily with every moment that passed. Leopardstar's ears pricked suddenly as a quiet *mew* caught her attention. She looked to her side and saw the small spotted tabby kit curled up on the ground next to her. Then the bushes in front of Leopardstar stirred, and a pretty white and ginger she-cat walked out, heading over to her.

It was a cat she didn't remember seeing in life, but as her scent wreathed around her, Leopardstar recognized her immediately.

"Mom..." Leopardstar murmured.

"Hello Leopardstar," Brightsky said with a soft purr.

Leopardstar's eyes widened as fear suddenly stabbed in her chest. Was her mother here to punish her for taking Tigerstar as her mate? But, Brightsky didn't look angry. Instead, she just walked over to the small spotted-brown tom, gazing down at him with gentle eyes.

"What do you want to call him?" Brightsky asked.

Leopardstar's gaze flicked back down to the kit.

"How about Pebblekit, for his spots?" Leopardstar said.

"I like that," Brightsky purred.

She bent her head to carefully pick up the tiny kit and put him at her ginger paws, where she started grooming him gently.

"I'm losing a life aren't I?" Leopardstar asked.

Brightsky nodded.

"Yes. But, you will be able to go back soon. I will take good care of Pebblekit. And, I've found someone for you to take care of your other two kits. She will be there soon," Brightsky said, still gazing down at Pebblekit.

"Thank you Mom," Leopardstar whispered. "They will have a better

life with her than I one I could give them. And, I'm sorry for everything..."

Brightsky's gaze flickered back up to Leopardstar.

"Don't worry, Leopardstar," Brightsky said with a reassuring purr. "You are my daughter; I've always been watching over you. And, I will continue to until we all walk in StarClan together."

Leopardstar blinked, and she found herself back under the holly bush. She groaned as she lifted her head off the ground. Exhaustion and weakness dragged at every inch of her. Her cheek was sore where her face had hit the ground, her tongue was still bleeding, and she had a pounding headache... but she was alive again at least.

Leopardstar glanced around blearily. She was still lying in a pool of her own blood, and Pebblekit was motionless and dead again. But, she had two living kits nursing at her belly. Leopardstar bent her head to give them a better grooming. One kit was a golden-spotted she-cat. The other was a dark tabby tom with white. Leopardstar peered at him harder, realizing that his white markings mirrored those Brightsky had.

"Oh my goodness are you okay?!" a voice called from outside the holly bush.

Leopardstar jumped in fright, having not noticed the cat's approach, but she didn't have the strength to rise to her paws to meet her. From the scent on the air, it was the same she-cat she'd smelt earlier, the one with milk-scent on her pelt.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you! I was inside the house sleeping, but then I had the strangest dream, and when I woke up, I just had this odd feeling that I really need to go outside. And, here you are, and all that blood...!"

Through the dense branches of the holly bush, Leopardstar could just make out wide, worried blue eyes peering out of a dark-brown furred face.

This must be the cat Brightsky was talking about!

"I'm very weak," Leopardstar said, her voice rasping in her throat.

"I can see that!" the stranger replied. "Do you need help? I can get you some food. Or water. Or my house-folk."

Leopardstar shook her head.

"No. None of that. No two-legs... what I need..." Leopardstar said hoarsely, swallowed hard. "...Can you care for these two kits? I don't have the strength to."

The cat's blue eyes looked at her uncertainly.

"You- you want me to take your kits?" she said, her voice halting. "Are- are you sure no two-legs? They have ways of helping us you know. They can heal you..."

She was staring at Leopardstar with fearful eyes, as if she thought Leopardstar was going to die on her then and there.

Well, I did just die, so she's actually not that far off... but she doesn't know that I have more than one life.

Leopardstar however, shook her head firmly.

"No two-legs," she repeated, her voice hoarse.

"I do have one young kit, so I have plenty of milk to nurse them," the kitty-pet continued. "If... if you're sure..."

Leopardstar was already nodding.

"Please. I can't care for them. Their brother is already dead, I don't want them to die too," Leopardstar rasped, playing up her weakness as she let her head bob down to indicate Pebblekit.

Guilt pricked at her slightly. She knew she was telling the friendly she-cat half-truths, but it had to be done.

It's true that I can't care for them. I can't take them back to the Clan.

The stranger's gaze flickered down, noticing Pebblekit for the first

time. Leopardstar watched as a wave of grief at the sight washed over the she-cat's face, and Leopardstar knew that she had convinced her.

"Aw, well what's two kits more. Okay," the she-cat said. "I'll take them. And, you can come visit them whenever you want."

"Thank you," Leopardstar rasped, relief surging over her.

The kitty-pet shot her a pitying glance, and Leopardstar knew she wasn't the only one telling half-truths. This she-cat clearly thought Leopardstar was going to die at any moment, and telling her that she could visit was just a comfort for what she thought was a dying queen.

"Of course," the stranger said gently.

Leopardstar passed the tabby tom out of the bush to the she-cat first. He mewed as he was separated from Leopardstar, but the she-cat scooped him up quickly and gently.

"I'll take him inside, then come back for the other one," she said.

She-cat trotted away, vanishing into the two-leg den through a flap on the side. She was back alone a few moments later, having dropped the first kit off. Leopardstar passed the golden she-cat out to her next, a cold fog of sadness enveloping her as she handed her last living kit away.

"Goodbye," Leopardstar whispered to her.

You two will have a better life without me.

The she-cat hesitated.

"Are you *sure* you don't want to come inside too?" the stranger asked, placing the kit down at her paws as she lingered outside the bush.

It seemed like she was still trying to save Leopardstar's life.

"I can't," Leopardstar murmured, looking down at her paws. "I'm

sorry. Just take care of them for me."

"I will," the she-cat said softly. "Do you want to name them?"

Leopardstar shook her head.

"They're more yours now than they are mine," she rasped. "You should name them."

The she-cat's blue eyes filled with sadness, and she opened her mouth as if to argue back, but then the kit at the stranger's paws began crying, interrupting their conversation. The she-cat dipped her head, picking her up.

"Well, alright," the she-cat said from around the kit in her mouth. "I guess this is goodbye... for now then."

"Yes," Leopardstar said quietly. "Goodbye. Thank you again."

"I'll take good care of them," the she-cat promised.

She turned and carried the other kit into the den. As soon as she left, Leopardstar began burying Pebblekit under the bush, working quickly to cover his little body. She didn't want to linger under the bush and give the she-cat another chance to come over and try again to convince her to get two-leg help. Or, for the she-cat to come by to check to see if Leopardstar had died in her yard.

As soon as Pebblekit's body was buried, Leopardstar clawed her way out of the bush. Her legs were shaky, but they still were able to hold her up. Her hind-legs, tail and belly fur were caked with blood, and Leopardstar was sure that it must make her look like something out of a nightmare. But, she wasted no time with grooming, instead she just pointed herself back in the direction of RiverClan territory.

Home.

It was deep into the night by the time Leopardstar made it back to camp. The whole journey back, she had only stopped once, in order to wade into a stream to wash the blood out of her pelt. Her territory was deserted this time of night, and the only cat she saw when she got back to camp was Shadepelt, who was the camp

guard. Leopardstar didn't have the energy for a conversation, so she just nodded at her warrior before brushing through the reeds and into the camp.

Leopardstar sighed at the familiar sight of her camp, wanting nothing more than to collapse into her nest and sleep. But, the thought of being alone in her den filled her with an anxiety close to panic, so instead, she turned towards the medicine cat's den.

Leopardstar brushed through the reed framed entrance, hesitating a moment before entering fully into the den. Mudfur stirred as he heard her foot-falls.

"Leopardstar? You're back?" he asked, raising his head.

Leopardstar just padded over to him without replying, collapsing into his nest next to him. She was trembling slightly, from exhaustion and emotion as the trials of the past two days hit her like a massive wave. She felt like her whole body was giving out on her.

"It's okay. It's okay," Mudfur murmured as Leopardstar pressed herself against his side.

She turned her head, laying her chin on her father's back, her eyes already drifting shut as the current of exhaustion pulled her under. The last thing she felt was Mudfur gently grooming her ears. The turmoil inside of her quieted for a heartbeat, and for a moment, a soft purr rumbled in Leopardstar's throat, then she was asleep.

Leopardstar woke up around sun-high of the next day. Mudfur got her some fresh-kill and some herbs to stop her milk from coming as she explained to him what had happened on her journey.

After telling her father everything, Leopardstar was so exhausted from reliving the events that she wanted nothing more than to lie back down and sleep some more, but she knew that there was one last thing she needed to do that day. Leopardstar asked Mudfur to fetch Mistyfoot so she could speak to her alone, and she waited for her deputy in the medicine cat's den.

Mistyfoot crept though the reed-framed entrance hesitantly, her eyes scanning Leopardstar's haggard appearance.

"Are you okay?" Mistyfoot asked in greeting. "Do you still have green-cough? You don't look so good..."

Leopardstar shook her head, sighing quietly.

"I'm not okay," Leopardstar whispered. "I haven't been okay since TigerClan."

Mistyfoot's eyes snapped sharply to Leopardstar's at the sudden mention of TigerClan. Leopardstar gazed unwaveringly back into their dark blue depths.

"Mistyfoot, I've been thinking about what you said," Leopardstar said slowly and deliberately. "About how I haven't been the leader RiverClan needs, how I've been distant, and why you don't trust me..."

Mistyfoot's eyes narrowed slightly as she waited for Leopardstar to continue.

"And, I understand," Leopardstar whispered. "I understand why you don't trust me right now, and that you might not be able to again. And, not only that, but I agree with you. I want you to watch me. What I let happen to Stonefur... what *I did* to Stonefur—"

Leopardstar's voice broke, and she had to swallow, trembling slightly, before she could keep speaking.

"—Is unforgivable," she forced herself to continue. "So, I would never ask forgiveness from you for it. And, if I ever show signs of being that way again, I want you to stop me. You have to."

"I will watch you. Everyday I live," Mistyfoot vowed, her voice low.

Leopardstar's and Mistyfoot's gaze met. Leopardstar tried and failed to read the maelstrom of emotions that swirled in their blue depths.

"There is not a day that goes by that I am not filled with grief and anguish and guilt by his death, and what I allowed happen to you

and Feathertail and Stormfur," Leopardstar said, her voice rasping in her throat. "And, I will be paying penance for that for the rest of my life."

"You're not allowed to grieve him," Mistyfoot said in a fierce whisper, blinking her eyes hard. "Not when you are the one that did it to him."

"Your feelings are understandable," Leopardstar admitted, looking away from her at down at the ground. "But, I still do. Because he was my best friend. Despite it all..."

Mistyfoot was silent, and Leopardstar took a deep, trembling breath and continued.

"But, all of that is in the past. From this heartbeat on, I give my *everything* to RiverClan. Nothing and no one will ever come before my duty to RiverClan and my loyal cats. I know I can't change what I did, but I can try to make RiverClan as safe and happy as possible, in honor of him."

Leopardstar's gaze flickered back to Mistyfoot's.

"And, let me make myself clear, Mistyfoot—you are RiverClan. I know Tigerstar and I..."

In her mind, Leopardstar saw a flash of the starving, trembling half-clan cats crouched before Bonepile, but she shook her head fiercely as she tried to dislodge the memories.

"But, that doesn't matter. You always have been loyal and *good*. Even when I haven't. I... I am humbled to call you my deputy and to know that one day you will lead RiverClan."

Mistyfoot was still silent for a long moment.

"I appreciate you saying that, Leopardstar" Mistyfoot murmured finally. "I will think on this."

Mistyfoot started to walk out of the den, but she paused before exiting, her tail flicking back and forth uncertainly behind her.

"...Did you see him?" she said quietly from over her shoulder, not quite meeting Leopardstar's eyes. "When you went to the Moonstone?"

Leopardstar hesitated, bowing her head.

"Yes." Her voice was soft, barely above a whisper. "I apologized to him."

"What... what did he seem like?" Mistyfoot meowed hesitantly.

Leopardstar paused for a moment.

"He seemed... at peace," Leopardstar said.

Mistyfoot nodded, her eyes distant as if she was gazing deeply within herself, then she turned and padded out of the den.

As the seasons changed, so too did RiverClan. Leopardstar threw herself whole-heartedly into her role as leader, and she was slowly rewarded as, with time, she watched her clan-mates grow safer and happier with every passing sunrise.

Towards the end of leaf-bare, WindClan needed some watermint when a string of bellyaches broke out in their elders, queens, and kits, and Leopardstar and Mudfur shared the herb with them happily. At the next gathering, Leopardstar could almost see Tallstar's icy demeanor towards RiverClan thawing with her own eyes as he publicly thanked her for her generosity. ThunderClan was also warming back towards RiverClan, and to help it along, Leopardstar even made a point to compliment Feathertail and Stormfur to Graystripe. The ThunderClan deputy seemed quite pleased that his kits had become strong RiverClan warriors.

Her RiverClan warriors too, finally crept closer and closer to forgiveness towards her. They were no longer blatantly disrespectful, and some even offered to share prey with her or showed a willingness to chat and share tongues.

But, still, the cat whose approval Leopardstar desired the most remained Mistyfoot. And, her deputy was a stubborn creature. It took a long time, even longer than it took her to win WindClan and

ThunderClan over to her, for Mistyfoot to start to come around. She kept her promise of course. She was always a competent, loyal, and supportive deputy in front of the Clan, but Leopardstar could still feel her privately watching her every move, waiting to see if Leopardstar would slip up and endanger her clan-mates again. As the moons past, though, and it became more clear that Leopardstar was giving it her all, like the budding new-leaf, Mistyfoot too began to warm.

Like any changing season though, it did not happen all at once. It was impossible to go from snowing and bitterly cold one day, to roaring heat and sunshine the next. The world simply didn't work that way.

So, it was subtle at first— just the holding of Leopardstar's gaze when she looked at her instead of turning her eyes away. Then the choice to sit a few fox-lengths closer when it was time to eat instead of positioning herself at the other side of the camp. Then, the sharing of a personal comment, letting Leopardstar know that she and Blackclaw were expecting kits.

Leopardstar was happy for her deputy. If Mistyfoot's interactions with Stormfur and Feathertail were any indication, she would make a wonderful mother, even though Leopardstar did also feel a pang in her chest as she thought of what her kits might be like now... if she had kept them.

Then one sunrise, days and days later, Leopardstar found herself sitting with a group of her warriors under the shining green-leaf sun, laughing at Heavystep's impression of an overweight dog trying desperately to lumber after a cat to chase it away. As Leopardstar gasped for breath between purrs, managing to finally wrangle her lungs back under her control, her gaze flickered up and met Mistyfoot's.

Mistyfoot was sitting next to the nursery, keeping a half of an eye on her four rambunctious kits and purring just as hard as Leopardstar at Heavystep's joke.

When their gazes met, her blue eyes shimmered with mischief and mirth, as if they were asking Leopardstar *'Can you believe this?'*

And, for the first time in seasons, Leopardstar could see no trace of bitterness in those eyes.

Leopardstar wouldn't say that they were friends again. She wasn't even sure if that was something realistic for her to hope for— if it would ever happen again in their lifetimes.

But, she couldn't shake the feeling that she'd been drowning, and then suddenly, with the glimmer of those blue eyes, her head broke through the surface. She was still caught in the current, but now she was treading water. She could see the shore. All she had to do was keep going and have the strength to reach it.

Leopardstar shook her head faintly at Mistyfoot to answer the question in her gaze. Mistyfoot rolled her eyes exaggeratedly, prompting Leopardstar to purr again.

Leopardstar's gaze flickered upwards. A warm breeze stirred her whiskers, soaking through her body, traveling through her blood all the way down to her chest. And, she realized that the trees had leaves on them again.

End.

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Notes:

Thank you for reading!

I've made Mothwing and Hawkfrost Leopardstar's kits here. I mean, Tigerstar (Dark tabby) + Leopardstar (Golden spots) = Hawkfrost (Dark tabby) & Mothwing (Golden spots.) The math checks out.

Haha, but seriously, the point of this fic wasn't about that; it was a challenge to myself to try to fill in some gaps in canon, and to try to make Leopardstar a bit more sympathetic of a character.

Anyway, be sure to leave a comment letting me know what you think of the story. Again, thanks for everyone for reading! I hope you enjoyed!